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THE KHASI HUTS OF MAWPHLANG

BY

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114 Post-Graduate students of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Calcutta are expected to do a certain amount of field work for practical training. In 1940 a Khasi village was studied by us, the students of the Post-Graduate class, as part of our training, under the guidance of Prof. K. P. Chattopadhyay, the Head of the Department of Anthropology, whom we have 121 to thank also for the photographs used for this paper. This note 342 on Khasi house structure is based on our work in the village of Mawphlang, the headquarters of the Khasi State of this name, in the Khasi Hills, Assam. Our studies included a survey of the village and its house types. Particular attention was paid to the structure of the old type of Khasi house.

342 Gurdon in his book on the Khasis of Assam describes the Khasi hut as elliptical in shape. But in Mawphlang we found that they can be more strictly said to be 'U'-shaped, in ground plan the bend of the 'U' being the front, the two parallel arms the sides, and a straight line connecting the two ends of the two arms of the 'U' the rear. We found this to be the type of most of the old houses of Mawphlang village. As is well known it is the custom among Khasis for the women of a family to live together, until the number of members increases so much that they cannot be provided with room in a single house. Then new houses are built. It is usual for a married couple with children to put up a separate

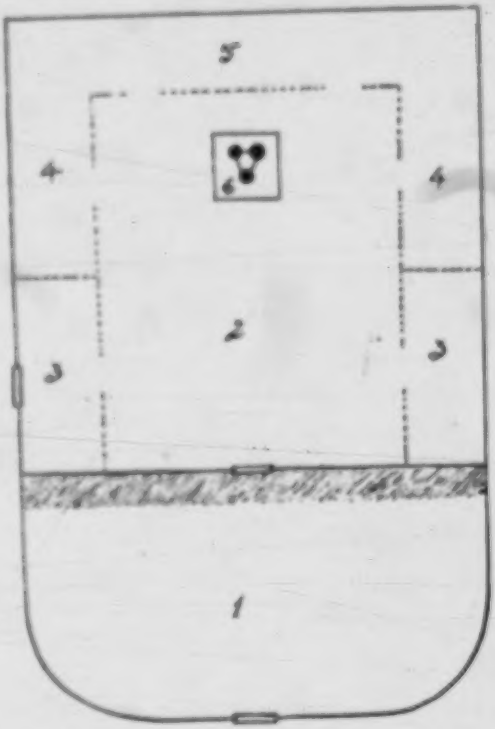
but for themselves. In all these cases the youngest daughter of the family who is known as the Ka Khadduh of the family must live in the old house and maintain the social and religious traditions of the family. In the village of Mawphlang we found that the houses of all the Ka Khadduhs like Ka Sadia, Ka Hosibon and others, and also the old house of the wife of U. Suburai, the myntri of the Mawphlang State, all belong to this 'U'-shaped type. This association of Ka Khadduhs and 'U' shaped huts suggests that this is the old type. The modern huts vary in their structure some being like modern bungalows common now-a-days in Shillong.

The old Khasi house, in general, can be described as follows :—

Generally there is a compound in front and a pigsty at one side, the whole site being enclosed by a fencing of reed and small plants or of wooden planks or some such material. The hut as observed from outside is elliptical in front and box-shaped behind (as seen in the diagram). It is 'U'-shaped in the ground plan. The roof of the hut is sloped on the two sides and spread out like a fan, in a semi-circle, in front.

The material used in the construction of the hut varies. In some of the old houses the walls were found to be made of blocks of stone with mud in the interstices serving the purpose of mortar. The roof had a bamboo frame covered with thatching grass. In other old huts the walls were not entirely made of stone blocks. In some we found the front portion made entirely of stone, the lower portions of the side and of the rear walls, up to a level of two to three feet, made of stone, the remaining portions being made of wooden planks or reeds covered with mud. In some modified huts again (either they were built later or the old huts were repaired) the entire rear wall except at the base and the upper portions of the sides were made of tinplates from used cans nailed to a frame. In some huts corrugated and galvanised iron sheets have been used. The material for the roof

also varies a good deal now-a-days, some being of corrugated galvanised iron sheets and others of flat tinplate sheets instead of



Ground plan

1. Ka Kyndur; 2. Ka Nympei;
3. Ka Kynrein; 4. Ka Jing Kyndong;
5. Ka Rumpei; 6. Ka Dypei.

thatching grass. In some modified houses we found a porch added in front of the main door of the hut.

Entering the hut by the main door, the interior can be divided into two compartments, the front one which is on the ground level and the inner compartment which has a wooden floor raised to a height of about four feet supported on pillars of stone..

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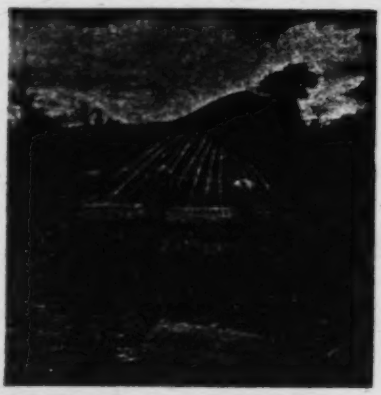
Construction of the frame of the Ka Kyndur



Thatching the Ka Kyndur

[facing p. 180]

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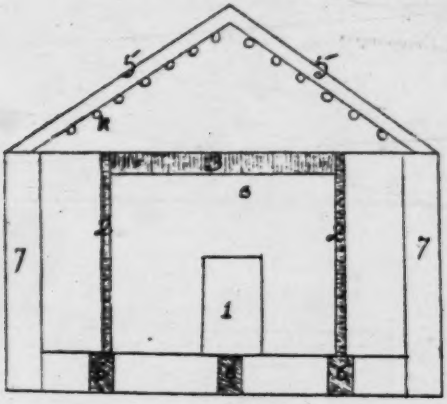
342. In some huts there is a wooden partition in between the two compartments, while in others it is absent. The front compart-



ELEVATION

1. Door; 2. Supporting pillar; 3. Bahlymphan
4. U pyniar; 5. (Kynshi) & U bnoh; 6. Supporting pillar of wooden floor; 7. Outer walls.

ment on the ground floor is known in Mawphlang as Ka Kyndur, while the raised portion is known as Ka Nympei. The Ka Kyndur is smaller than the Ka Nympei and is roughly semi-circular in shape as it is formed of the front portion of the hut. Its floor is paved with stone or made of beaten earth. In some huts where there is a partition between the Ka Kyndur and the Ka Nympei, there is a raised shelf in the Ka Kyndur which is really the projection of the wooden floor of the Ka Nympei. From the Ka Kyndur the Ka Nympei is reached by means of a few steps made of stone or a short staircase of wood. Where there is a partition between the Ka Kyndur and the Ka Nympei there is a door in the middle of the wooden partition to enter the Ka Nympei.

The Ka Nympei is rectangular in shape and comprises about two-thirds of the area of the hut. The Ka Nympei is not a single compartment but is divided into smaller compartments at its two sides and the rear by means of low wooden partitions.

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342 But in some huts there are no such partitions and the demarcation is made by the pillars and beams which support the roof of the hut. The small enclosures at the two sides in the front portion are known locally as Ka Kynrein. The Ka Kynrein at the right hand side of the Ka Nympei close to the Ka Kyndur generally is used for storing water. The Ka Kynrein at the left hand side of the Ka Nympei just opposite to that for storing water is used as a larder for potatoes and other provisions. The enclosures at the rear of the Ka Nympei and those remaining at its sides are used as sleeping places. The sleeping places at the sides are known as Ka Iing Kyndong and those at the rear as Ka Rumpei. In most huts there is a window in the Ka Rumpei, high up in the back wall of the hut. In some huts there is a window in the front wall, in the Ka Kyndur. In many huts there is no window at all. Besides the main door in the Ka Kyndur, there is another door to the Ka Kynrein at the right hand side of the Ka Nympei. We were informed that in Cherra the part called Ka Kyndur is termed Ka Shyngkup, and Ka Kynrein as Ka Pyngshai.

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In the centre of the Ka Nympei there is the hearth known as Ka Dypei. It is a rectangular space, about four feet and a half in length and three feet and a half in breadth, enclosed by fenders of wood. The floor of the hearth is paved with stone and mud. In the centre of it there are three small-shaped stone pieces which are known as Mawbyrsiew. On the Mawbyrsiew there is an iron triangle known as Ka Nar to hold the pots. The space of the Ka Nympei behind the hearth and in front of the Ka Rumpei is known as Jingbuhkhiewja.

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Running round the edge of the Ka Nympei at a man's height there is a wooden frame supported on vertical posts; to this frame are fixed the partitions, separating the Ka Nympei from the Ka Kyndur, Ka Kynrein, Ka Iing Kyndong and Ka Rumpei. This wooden frame is known as Bahtymphan or Bahtympha. Just above the Bahtymphan several stout beams of wood cross the house from side to side and rest on the

352 Babtymphan. They are known as Ukhung. The Ukhung above the Dypei are placed close to one another. A little apart from this row of Ukhungs, there is a single Ukhung parallel to the others which in some huts is hollowed out and is used as a receptacle for some household articles.

342 The frame of the roof as observed from inside consists of a central ridge pole running along the length of the hut and situated above the middle of it. From the ridge pole pairs of rafters diverge on two sides, their lower ends resting on the side walls of the hut. In front of the hut, the rafters are radially spread out from the anterior end of the ridge pole which is supported by a vertical pole known as Rijit. These rafters rest on semi-circular wall at the bend of the 'U'. The ridge pole and the rafters are known as Kynshi. Besides the rafters there are thinner wooden poles similarly arranged which further strengthen the frame of the roof. They are known as Ubnoh. The small rafters which are set cross-wise on the sloping Kynshi and form each series a 'U' round the ceilling are known as U Pyniar. This frame for the roof is made on those huts where thatching grass is used, that is, in the old type of huts. In modern huts where corrugated or flat sheets of iron have been used instead of thatching grass such a frame is not required.

In the village of Mawphlang, we saw an old type hut, of Ka Lita repaired and re-built. At first the raised rectangular portion of the hut, the Ka Nympei, was reconstructed on a raised platform, with the frame for the roof above it. Then a semi-circular area was taken in front of the Ka Nympei about one-third the area of the inner compartment. Simultaneously with the making of the frame of the Ka Kyndur, the thatch was made in sections in bamboo frames. Then the roof of the hut was covered with these sections which were arranged in overlapping sheets (see plate). An old type Khasi hut is about thirty feet long; it is about twenty feet wide at the back.

343 Reference has been made to the usual pigsty adjoining each house. It is generally a small thatched shed with walls made of

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wood and grass matting. The shed may be partitioned into two compartments one for keeping the cows and the other for keeping pigs. The upper portion of the pigsty is used for storing fuel in some houses. There is no uniformity in respect of this shed.

All the 'U'-shaped huts found in the Mawphlang village were studied. Besides these typical 'U'-shaped huts there are many other huts in the village which are rather flattened in front and can be said to belong to the flattened 'U'-type. In the table given below the variations are shown in detail of the typical 'U'-type huts and also of a flattened 'U'-type hut belonging to Ka Labirmon of Lyngdoh clan. It is peculiar that all these huts have their main door facing north.

Serial No.	*Owner of the hut.*	*Materials used.*	*Peculiarities.*
I.	Ka Hosibon (Khar Hunai).	*Wall*—In front entirely of stone. Lower portions of sides and rear of stone. Upper portions of sides of wood, reed and mud. Upper portion of rear of thatch. *Roof*—Thatched entirely.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. No partition between Ka Nympei and its enclosures.
II.	Ka Krin (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Wood with an outer cover of reed and thatch. *Roof*—Thatching grass.	No partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei, and between Ka Nympei and its enclosures.
III.	Ka Thaiup	*Wall*—Planks covered with thatch. *Roof*—Thatched.	No partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympie but the front Bahtymphan is present.
IV.	Ka Pre (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Planks with outer thatchings. Very low stone wall all round, at the base. *Roof*—Thatched.	No partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei.
V.	Ka Li (Rani)	*Wall*—Low stone wall all round. Upper portions of front of reed and mud. Upper portions of side and rear of planks with outer cover of thatch. *Roof*—Thatched.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei.

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Serial No.	Owner of the hut.	Materials used.	Peculiarities.
VI.	Ka Iet (Khar Dumpep).	*Wall*—Front, sides, and lower portions of rear of stone Upper portions of rear of flat tinned sheets. *Roof*—Thatched.	Same as above.
VII.	Ka Ke (Lyngdoh)	*Wall*—Front, sides, and lower portion of rear of stone Upper portion of rear of flat tinned sheets. *Roof*—Thatched.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. In front of the main door a porch has been added,—a two sloped tin shed resting on four wooden pillars.
VIII.	Ka Sadia (Iangblah).	*Wall*—Front and lower portions of sides and rear of stone. Upper portion of left wall of flat tinned sheets. Upper portions of right wall and rear of thatch. *Roof*—Thatched.	No partitions.
IX.	Ka Pren (Khar Hunai).	*Wall*—Front and lower portions of sides and rear of stone. Upper portions of sides of wood, bamboo, and mud. Upper portions of rear of thatch *Roof*—Sloping sides of corrugated sheets. Front thatched.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. No partition between Ka Nympei and its enclosures.
X.	Ka Kin (Iangblah).	*Wall*—Low stone walls all round. *Roof*—Thatched.	
XI	Ka Krek (Rap Thap).	*Wall*—Front entirely of stone. Lower portions of sides and rear of stone, upper portions of planks. *Roof*—Flat tin plate.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei, and between Ka Nympei and its enclosures. One window in Ka Rumpei.
XII.	Ka Eiribon (Iangblah).	*Wall*—Stone all round. *Roof*—Corrugated iron sheets.	All the partitions present. Two windows at the bend of the 'U' by the two sides of the main door. One window at the back of Ka Rumpei at the left side of it.
XIII.	Ka Ko (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Lower portions of stone. Upper portions of sides of bamboo and mud. Upper portion of rear of tinned sheets. *Roof*—Tinplate.	No partition beeween Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei.

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Serial No.	Owner of the hut	Materials used.	Peculiarities.
XIV.	Ka Shyrngeh (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Front, sides, and lower portions of rear stone. Upper portion of rear of flat tinned sheets. *Roof*—Corrugated sheets of iron.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. A porch in front of hut similar to that in Ka Ke's hut.
XV.	Ka To(Lyngdoh)	*Wall*—Front and lower portions of sides of stone. Upper portions of sides of bamboo and mud. Rear almost entirely of flat tinned sheets. *Roof*—Entirely of flat tinplate.	
XVI.	Ka Pabon (Khar Dohling).	*Wall*—Front, sides, and lower portions of rear of stone. Upper portion of rear of flat sheets. *Roof*—Corrugated sheets of iron.	No partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. No steps in Ka Kyndur to reach Ka Nympei. A small porch in front of main door as in the hut of Ka Ke.
XVII.	Ka Donbon (Lyngdoh.)	*Wall*—Lower portions of stone all round, upper portions of corrugated iron sheet *Roof*—Corrugated sheets of iron.	Small opening in the rear wall.
XVIII.	Ka Wer (Khar Wankher).	*Wall*—Same as above. *Roof*—Same as above.	
XIX.	Ka Kyrhen (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Low stone wall all round at the base. Upper portions of sides and front of corrugated sheets. Upper portion of rear of tinplate. *Roof*—of tinplate.	Partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei. Small porch in front of main door as mentioned in some huts previously.
XX.	Ka Labirmon (Lyngdoh).	*Wall*—Low stone wall all round. Upper portions of corrugated sheets. *Roof*—Corrugated sheets of iron.	No partition between Ka Kyndur and Ka Nympei.

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It has already been said that the Khasi house type is now changing. Some such changes have been noted in the table, such as, the addition of a porch, the ground plan of one hut changing into a flattened 'U,' and the extensive use of flat or corrugated iron sheets in place of thatch. As mentioned previously besides these typical 'U'-type huts, in many other huts the bend of the 'U' in front has been flattened but the oval roof in front is present. This is quite common. In other modified

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342 huts the ground plan is entirely rectangular. In this type of huts the materials used are also different, the corrugated sheets and wooden planks being more used than blocks of stone and thatching grass. The inner apartments, however, conform to the old plan. In the market place of the village there are some houses which are two-storied, the front of the ground floor of which have been utilised for shops. These houses do not at all conform to the old ' U '-type but are square or rectangular in
342 ground plan. Near the market place there are three houses
177 of well-to-do Khasis which resemble the bungalows of Europeans of Shillong (and of the Mission house at Mawphlang) in their structure and material. In these modern houses unlike the old ones the main door faces the street. The myntr U. Suburai who is one of the well-to-do persons of Mawphlang village has his old house (that is, the old house he put up for his wife after marriage) of the ' U '-type, the description of which has been given in the preceding table under the name of the owner, the wife of U Suburai, Ka Shyrngeh. But their new house which has been added to their old one in front of it is altogether of the bungalow type. This new house is entered from a porch in front, leading to the central room which is used as parlour. The myntri generally sits here with his friends, round the fire-place, which is not a Dypei but a hearth in European style. The kitchen is beyond this room. Bed-rooms open from the drawing room to the sides.

342 A plan of the village showing the distribution of the various
361 types of hut in Mawphlang is given below. From the plan it
177 will be found that out of the 160 houses in the village, inhabited at present, the typical 'U'-type of huts form about 11·3 per cent.; the flattened 'U'-type about 35·0 per cent.; the intermediate type, which has totally given up the 'U'-shaped ground plan but has its interior of the old type, about 27·5 per cent. and the English bungalow type about 26·2 per cent. This data shows how rapidly the old type of Khasi hut is now changing.

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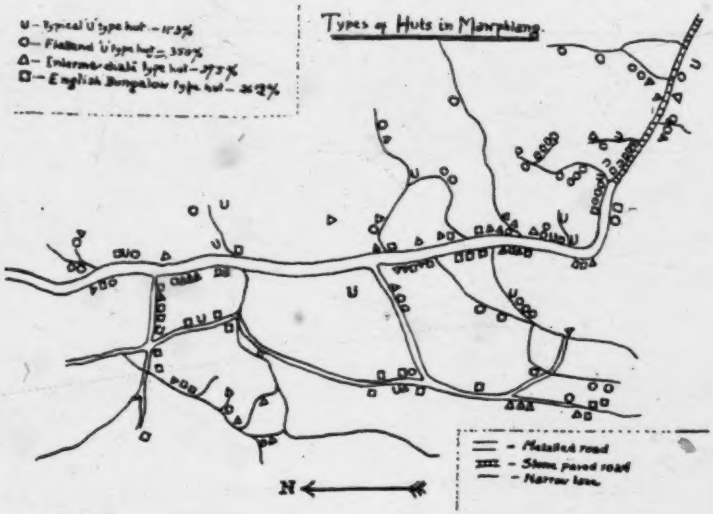
U – Typical 'U' type hut – 17·3%
O – Flattened 'U' type hut – 35·0%
Δ – Intermediate type hut – 37·7%
□ – English Bungalow type hut – 10·0%
Types of Huts in Mawphlang.
– Metalled road
– Stone paved road
– Narrow lane.
N

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361
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